

[Fire House Scene]

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“Living Lore in N.E.” Series

Francis Donovan

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Jan. 30, 1939 The Fire House Scene

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There is no one in the Fire House today, and though I wait hopefully for more than an hour, none of the members, active or honoarary, appears. Though the weather is inclement, which may account for the absence of some of them, it takes nothing less than an Act of God to keep the rugged Mr. MacCurrie indoors and his defection is something of a puzzle. I can only conclude that he has pressing business of some kind this afternoon, or that he has decided to spend a few hours at the home of one of his less active cronies.

The little circle which earlier in the fall numbered a good half dozen has become sadly depleted. Old Ed, who in the ten years since his retirement, rarely failed - come hell or high water - to spend each afternoon at the Fire House was the first to go--his demise having been duly chronicled in these dispatches some weeks ago. Mr. Odenwald has been in poor health for some time and is under orders of his physician to "take it easy." His visits are brief and infrequent. Mr. Armstrong has but recently returned from the hospital and is not yet permitted to come "down town." Mr. Richmond who because of his penchant for disagreement with virtually any given statement finds his popularity on our side at an all time low, frequents "the other side" almost exclusively.

A few words about "the other side" may be in order. One of the older members whose memory goes back to the early days of the organization of our Fire Department tells me that a spirit of bitter rivalry marked the relations of "Crescent Hose Number One" and "Hook 2 and Ladder Number Two" fifty or more years ago. So intense was the feeling between the two companies that members were forbidden to enter the quarters of their rivals. Friendships of years standing were ruptured and in one or two notable instances blood relationship was no bar to bitter quarrels. Old records of the two companies provide an interesting sidelight on this curious feud.

These are replete with sardonic comment on the tardiness of "the other side" in answering alarms, the sloppiness of their work once they arrived at the scene of action and their

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general [ineptitude?]. In their proficiency at more or less polite name calling the secretaries of both companies in these early days yielded the palm to no man.

Faint traces of the ancient feud remain, apparently a heritage. Though “the other side” is no longer verboten there in a sort of tacit understanding among members that the facilities of Crescent Hose Number One belong exclusively to the members of that department and vice versa, and that it is not exactly cricket for a Ladder man to go over and turn on the Crescents' radio. By this same token a member of the Crescents who came over to use the new shower would be in line for outspoken criticism.

The Crescents to this day retain the reputation of being “hard to get into,” and the exceeding deliberation with which they go about filling a vacancy in their membership list would seem to justify popular belief. They are also said (but this may be a canard propagated by some disappointed “joiner”) to be more than a little “close” in money matters. Be that as it may they are much less active than the Ladder Company in sponsoring social events, and their financial situation is a closely guarded mystery, while it is common knowledge that our side operates blithely on the treasury deficit principle.

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Our Fire House itself in of a style of architecture which no doubt has been outmoded these many years. It recently became necessary to reinforce the wooden floors, which were seen to “give” in alarming fashion when the heavy apparatus was driven in and out. The exterior of the building however is of sturdy red brick, impervious to the advance of time, and together with the town hall next door --a matter of community pride. The building is set on a ramp down which our two pieces of modern fire fighting apparatus thunder in imposing fashion at the sound of the factory whistles--or as soon thereafter as sundry volunteers can reach headquarters in their fast cars.

Lower floor interiors, of course, house the trucks, but there is room in the rear for a few card tables and straight backed wooden chairs. The chairs which we occupy in our daily

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forums are towards the front, facing the windows and from them we command a view of Main street and the adjacent town hall. Thus we are often furnished with conversational fuel by passersby when we have become talked out on topics of the day.

Upstairs are the parlors, where company meetings are held in Masonic seclusion. Those on our side have been recently renovated, furnished with deep-set upholstered chairs and couch and at the further end, with a ping-pong table. But this is a sanctum [sactorum?] into which I dare not venture except under the protecting wing of some member, though I am tolerated downstairs by virtue of long residence in the community. It is here that Mr. MacCurrie retires at periodic intervals daily to get his news programs over the radio. Being an honorary member, the old gentleman has the run of the entire "side" and is treated by younger members with a rough bantering & affection.

Mr. MacCurrie has confessed more than once that he would be "lost" if he couldn't come "doon to the Fire House." He boards with relatives who have a house full of children and he must seek elsewhere the peace and quiet that his nerves demand. Hence, his lengthy walks, his almost unalterable routine. For though he is fond of children, there is a certain point, he declares, beyond which his patience will bear him no longer.

Though he is not averse to conversation by any means, he is not so loquacious as some of his cronies, and his opinions on matters other than politics are obtained only after adroit maneuvering. Politically, however, he will take the field at any time and with any adversary, his frosty blue eyes snapping with excitement and the broad Scots rolling off his tongue like butter.

In his national and state sympathies he is uncompromisingly Republican. Lifelong conviction has been unseated where town politics are concerned, however, for Mr. MacCurrie bears a grudge against our First Selectman which will never be satisfied until that gentleman is defeated for office. This is the result of what he declares was a deliberate misappropriation of "compensation money" rightfully belonging to him. Mr.

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MacCurrie carries in his pocket and will produce with little or no urging especially when he has “had a few” irrefutable evidence of the wrong which has been done him. To the uninitiate the evidence might seem lacking the cohesiveness which is demanded by the more finicky of the judiciary, but Mr. MacCurrie's explanation is convincing.

However, the days when Mr. MacCurrie “has a few” one concludes, 5 are much fewer than he would like them to be. Reminiscences of his early youth and his lusty manhood, are apt to be prefaced, or concluded, with the remark, “Of course I was about half seas over at the time.”

His slender purse these days will not meet the demands of too heavy a thirst, and Mr. MacCurrie finds solace more often in his snuff box. He has recourse to it, indeed, whenever contemplation of the shifting scene furnishes puzzles too complex to be easily solved. The British foreign policy, the Sino-Japanese war, the gold standard, Messrs. Mussolini and Hitler, and economic and social bogies of all descriptions have been vanquished by the MacCurrie snuffbox time and again.

The keen, alert mentality of Mr. MacCurrie is excellently complemented by his sturdy physique. Though he is in his seventy-fifth year, he never has an “ache or a pain,” and he firmly believes that his inflexible habit of taking four or five mile walks daily is responsible in large measure for his splendid health. He has taken the winter in his stride, and bids fair to come through without so much as a cold.

He has been made the central figure in these little sketches largely because the daily forums on “our side” revolve around him and because he has been during all these weeks as immutable a fixture at the Fire House is the honor roll containing the names of the members who saw service during the great war.

Of the others who from time to time appear, Mr. Coburn is perhaps most worthy of note. He is typical, if anyone may be said to be typical, of the younger membership on “our side.” In his early thirties, unmarried, pleasure loving, Mr. Coburn is vitally interested 6

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in little except what he describes as a “good time,” though he will talk at length upon any conceivable subject. His political opinions are in a state of flux, for he is one day right and one day left, and he is often contradictory, though never uninteresting. Temporarily employed, Mr. Coburn will not be with us except possibly on Tuesday afternoons when the stores are closed, for some time.

Our Fire House, incidentally, is probably the last outpost of the old way of life, and it is here, if anywhere, that one may catch brief glimpses of the fusion of two eras. The few remaining old timers ---rugged Mr. MacCurrie as an outstanding example---belong to an age obviously regarded by their young successors as prehistoric. They were born and raised and spent their youth in a world incomprehensible to Mr. Coburn though it is doubtful whether that gentleman has ever given the matter much thought.

He meets Mr. MacCurrie here on a common ground, and their conversations are of subjects purely contemporary. On the other hand, on the occasions when there are other oldsters present, the discussion will eventually become reminiscent in character, and on the days when sufficient numbers of both old and young have gathered, there will be a formation of two distinct groups, often times at opposite ends of the room.

In our town, the cracker barrel discussions in grocery stores are a thing of the past, and the barber shops resemble those of the city-impersonal places shining with chromium fittings and too many mirrors where conversations are muted, and business proceeds with utmost efficiency. We have a post office --vintage 1938--which is the last word in modernity, and no longer do the young swains linger 7 at the church doors on Sunday evenings waiting for the girls.

The old order changes --even the town hall, we fear, will soon be in the nature of a white elephant, for it is losing tenants year by year. But the Fire House remains the same in its red brick austerity. Perhaps it is the only place an old timer can feel secure these days.